

Ethnicity in Special Education

A Project ALIGN Issue Brief

January 1997

A Macro-level Analysis

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Congressional Concern Grows

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) reports that although the numbers of children from diverse backgrounds in the nation's schools are increasing significantly, many of these children do not receive a free, appropriate, public education. Congress concluded that there is a compelling need to obtain greater success in the education of minority children with disabilities and that a more equitable distribution of resources is needed to provide an equal educational opportunity for all individuals (IDEA, Section 1409).

Congress observed in IDEA that there were several problems for minority students in special education. These included: the apparent disproportionate representation of children from diverse backgrounds in special education, the over-representation of African-American students in poverty as students with mental retardation, the unacceptably high drop out rates for minority children in special education, and the lack of, or inappropriate services to limited-English students.

IDEA states: "Greater efforts are needed to prevent the intensification of problems connected with mislabeling and high dropout rates among minority children with

disabilities. More minority children continue to be served in special education than would be expected from the percentage of minority students in the general school population. Poor African-American children are 3.5 times more likely to be identified by their teacher as mentally retarded than their white counterparts. Although African-American students represent 12 percent of elementary and secondary enrollment, they constitute 28 percent of the total enrollment in special education. The drop out rate is 68 percent higher for minorities than for whites. More than 50 percent of minority special education students in large cities drop out of school" (IDEA USC 1409[1][B]).

Minority children with disabilities, living in urban and high poverty environments are believed to be at a particularly high risk for educational failure and poor outcomes because of inappropriate identification, placement, and services. African-American students are over-identified and placed in overly restrictive settings (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

Other evidence

abounds that children from minority backgrounds may not be appropriately served under IDEA. Wagner

and colleagues reported that "the percentage of students in special education who were Black was higher than the corresponding percentage in

the general population of youth aged 15 to 19 (Wagner et al., 1991). This finding was based on a nationally representative sample of youth with disabilities. These researchers also found that the percentage of Hispanic children in special education was higher than in the general population of youth aged 15 to 20; other reports have found Asian-American and Native American children are often under represented in special

education (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Recent studies have reported that children representing non-dominant cultures, particularly African-American

children, are more likely to be placed in more segregated settings than children from the dominant culture (Obiakor, 1992; Ogbu, 1987; Singh, Ellis, Oswald, Wechsler, and Curtis, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Further, schools have particular difficulty providing appropriate educational services to students whose first language is not English (Baca & Cervantes, 1984; Gersten & Woodward, 1994).

Diversity is Increasing

Congress has found that the poor educational experience and outcomes for minority children with disabilities is particularly significant because America is becoming more diverse. By the year 2000, one in every three Americans will be either African-American, Hispanic, or Asian-American. The rate of increase for white Americans is lower than for

It is a more frequent phenomenon for minorities to comprise the majority of public school students.

There is a compelling need to obtain greater success in the education of minority children with disabilities (IDEA).

other racial and ethnic groups (IDEA, 20 USC 1409(j)).

America's changing ethnic and racial profile is having a tremendous impact on the educational system. "It is a more frequent phenomenon for minorities to comprise the majority of public school students," and although the limited English proficient population is "the fastest growing in our Nation, [there are] discrepancies in the levels of referral and placement of limited-English proficient children in special education." The Department of Education has found that services provided to limited-English proficient students often do not respond primarily to the pupils' academic needs" (20 USC 1409(j)(A)).

Congressional findings also described an educational system in some districts where students from diverse backgrounds currently represent the majority—an overwhelming majority in many large city school populations. In the two largest school districts in the country, almost half of those entering kindergarten are students who are limited-English proficient.

While the student population of the nation's schools is increasingly diverse and ethnic "minorities" are fast becoming a majority, individual states show dramatically different ethnicity base rates and rates of change with regard to students' ethnicity. In 1992, for example, the percent of the public school student population identified as "White / Caucasian" ranged from a low of 4% in the District of Columbia to a high of 97.7% in Vermont.

Examining Ethnicity and Special Education

Educators increasingly regard ethnic representation in special education as a complex, important

issue. As a first step, however, we believe the issue of ethnicity and special education must be viewed in the larger context of the diversity of the entire student population. In this *Issue Brief*, we investigate the role of ethnicity in special education by examining the impact of base rates of ethnicity on the identification, placement, and graduation rates of children with disabilities. This method focuses on system characteristics rather than individual student characteristics. Our intent is to base the investigation on the ethnicity distribution of students in the states' public education systems rather than on the ethnicity of students in special education. Therefore, we explored the relationship between the percent of non-white students in states' school populations and the rates at which special education students are (a) identified, (b) placed in restrictive settings, and (c) graduate from school.

To conduct the analyses we obtained state data for the percent of children who are white, the numbers of children with disabilities who are identified as disabled, the settings in which these students receive services, and how they leave school. The specific variables used in the analyses are defined in Table 1.

The Percent White variable was extracted from the National Center for Educational Statistics electronic catalog (NCES, 1992). The catalog is a collection of tables summarizing information relevant to education. Special education variables were taken from a large data set obtained through the cooperation of the U.S. Department of Education. This data set includes recent identification, placement, and exit data available for

children with disabilities for each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The data are identical to those published in the *Seventeenth Annual Report to Congress* (U.S. Department of Education, 1995) within the limits of rounding error, except for isolated cases in which the data set was updated after the *Annual Report* went to print.

Identification and Ethnicity Rates

The correlation between Percent White and Identification Rate is quite low and non-significant ($r = .17$). That is to say, at the state level, ethnicity of enrollment does not appear to be related to the rate of identification of students with disabilities.

Placement

With regard to placement in regular class settings, ethnicity is a statistically significant predictor. Percent White correlates moderately and positively with Percent Regular Class ($r = .42$, $p = .003$) indicating that those states with a higher proportion of White students serve more of their special education students in regular class settings. Figure 1 illustrates this relationship in a scatter plot. The state abbreviations are plotted as points. Where states are clustered together very closely, the state abbreviations are shown in a "block."

The scatter plot reveals that West Virginia, Arizona, and the District of Columbia, for example, serve very few of their special education students in regular class settings (about 10 percent), although they have very different ethnicity distributions.

Individual states show dramatically different ethnicity base rates and rates of change with regard to students' ethnicity.

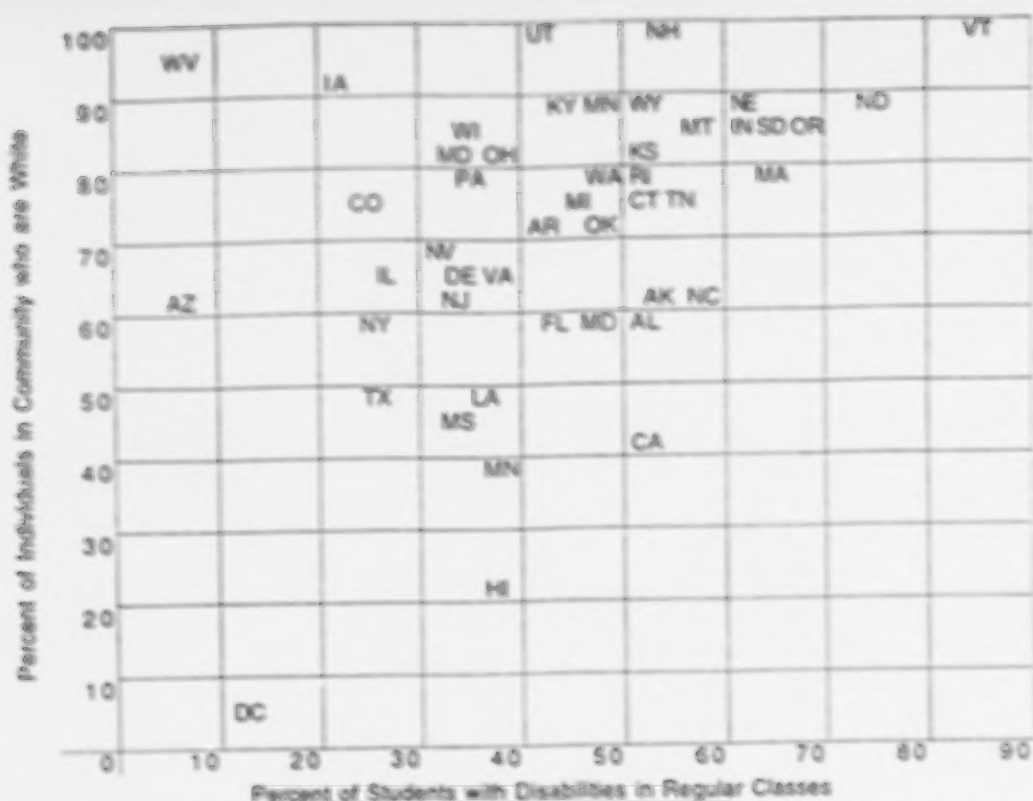


Figure 1. State Level Relationships Between Ethnicity and Placement in Regular Classes

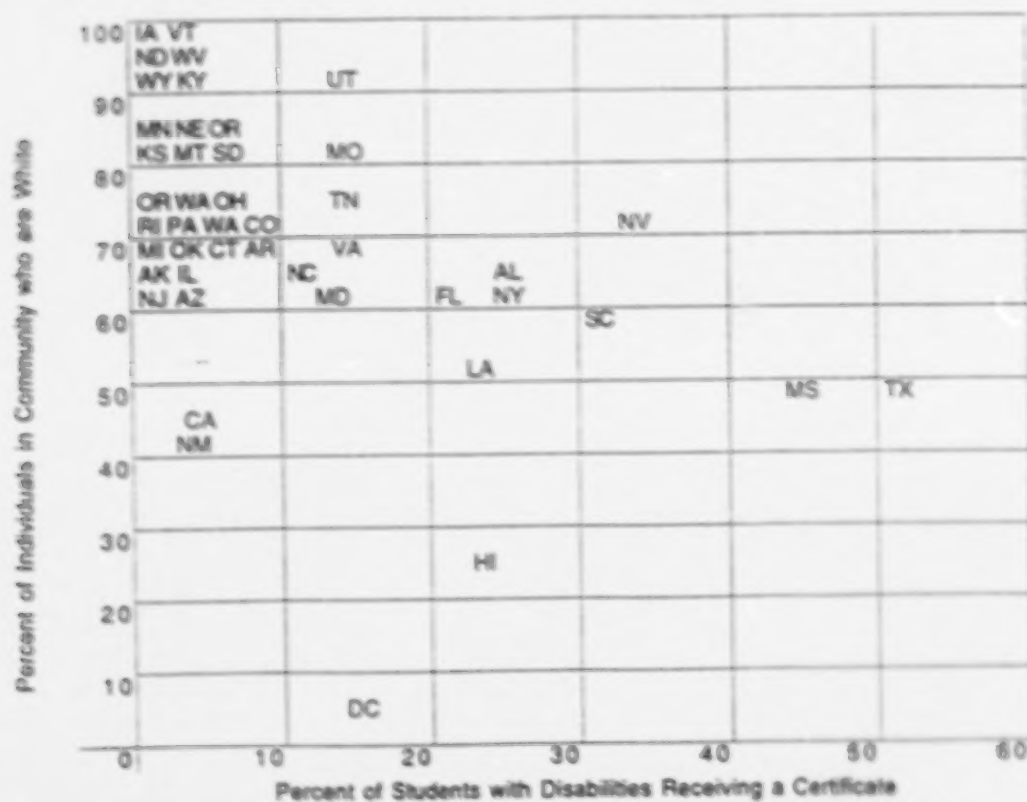


Figure 2. State Level Relationships Between Ethnicity and Certificates

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Table 1
Variables Included in Ethnicity Analyses

Percent White	The percentage of the 1992 enrollment in the state's public elementary and secondary school that was identified as white.
Identification Rate	The percentage of the state's resident population (age 6-21) that was identified as eligible for special education in the school year 1993-94; this includes all disability categories.
Percent Regular Class	The percentage of the state's special education students that received a majority of their education program in a Regular Class setting and received services outside the regular classroom for less than 21% of the school day.
Diploma Percent	The number of special education students in the state that graduated with a diploma, expressed as a percentage of all special education students who exited the system.
Certificate Percent	The number of special education students in the state that graduated with a certificate, expressed as a percentage of all special education students who exited the system.

North Dakota and Vermont, on the other hand, have mostly White student populations and serve most of their special students in regular class settings (about 70 percent and 85 percent, respectively).

Graduation and Ethnicity Rates

The findings for graduation are more complicated. Some states graduate special education students by diploma, some by certificate, and many by both diploma and certificate. Therefore, we examined the relationship of ethnicity to graduation by diploma, by certificate, and by diploma and certificate combined. These analyses revealed that ethnicity is not significantly related to graduation by diploma ($r = .22$) nor to diploma and certificate combined ($r = -.18$).

Ethnicity, however, is moderately correlated with Certificate Percent ($r = -.51$). The negative sign of this correlation indicates that states with a higher Percent White have fewer of their special education students leaving by

graduating with a certificate.

Figure 2 portrays this relationship in a scatter plot; again, the state abbreviations are plotted as points. Where states are clustered together very closely, the state abbreviations are shown in a "block."

Implications and Next Steps

The analyses reported above illustrate the value of exploring special education data at a macro level. Before seeking to explore the problem of disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities in special education, we need to understand the larger context: the

relationship of ethnicity in the entire student population to special education variables of interest.

These findings demonstrate that, at the state level, ethnicity of the student population is unrelated to identification. This result undermines any suggestion that systems with a higher proportion of minority students serve more (or fewer) students in special education programs. Thus, any policy initiatives

targeting special education identification rates may not need to address the ethnicity distribution of the student population as a whole.

The placement findings, however, reveal a different picture. The significant relationship between ethnicity and regular class placement is somewhat disturbing. Even at the relatively gross, macro-level of these analyses, the data suggest that ethnicity affects the continuum of placement options used by states. Further, the direction of this relationship indicates that systems that have greater proportions of minority students serve fewer of their special education students in regular classes. Such a relationship suggests that efforts to increase inclusion of special education students in regular education settings may be particularly important in systems with many minority students.

The correlation between ethnicity and placement does not provide information about the reason for the relationship. The finding does not mean that ethnicity is a causal factor in determining states' placement figures. The cause of greater or lesser use of regular classes for special education students is undoubtedly complicated by many varied factors. Nonetheless, the point of macro-level analyses such as those presented

...states with a higher proportion of White students serve more of their special education students in regular class settings.

above is to explore relationships that may affect policy decisions.

The interpretation of the graduation findings is rather complex. If we consider graduation by diploma or by certificate to be a successful completion for students with disabilities, then ethnicity of the school population is unrelated to successful completion rates. The relationship between ethnicity and graduation by certificate, however, indicates that states with a higher percentage of minority students have a greater percent of their special education students leaving school with a certificate. Given that a certificate is generally viewed to be less desirable and less marketable than a diploma, the finding may be important at the state policy level. States with fewer minority students may have more lenient standards for graduation by diploma or may more actively discourage the use of the certificate of completion. Again, the correlation offers no clues about the cause of the relationship; but it is disturbing to note that completion by certificate is a more likely outcome for special education students living in states with higher proportions of minority students than for those living in states with more white students.

Ethnicity is important

The ethnicity distribution of students is a relevant system-level characteristic that relates to special education identification, placement, and graduation rates. These findings lay the groundwork for a next level of analyses designed to clarify the problem of disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. A set of analyses are underway now to capture how poverty, demographics, and other educational variables influence identification and placement in special education for African-American and Hispanic

students. These studies are intended to assist in the current process of reauthorization of IDEA. Bills under consideration reiterate the concerns expressed in the currently authorized IDEA and call for states to collect additional data, and as necessary, take corrective actions.

The system-level study reported in this *Issue Brief* provides a foundation for these further studies and reinforces the impression that ethnicity and special education are interrelated in ways that are unplanned, unanticipated, and/or undesirable. The relationships also emphasize the point that policy reforms that do not consider the impact of ethnicity are likely to be short-sighted and to leave important aspects of the special education process unchanged.

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